

Project comes to light

■ Student film shows asbestos impact on teens

By STEVE KADEL

Western News Reporter

The tape opens with idyllic scenes of Libby and the surrounding area.

After a soft mood begins to settle in – bam! – the camera cuts to a close-up of asbestosis victim Les Skramstad talking about the disease that catapulted Libby into the national spotlight. The jarring change of pace is intended, and it is effective.

Nine students in Libby's Central School have been working for a year on a documentary called "A Breath of Life." Only recently, though, have they seen their baby take its first real steps.

Ninety seconds of finished material has been put together. The project is intended to show how teenagers growing up here, and learning about asbestos contamination, see the community changing for the better as it gets cleaned up, said teacher Dean Herreid, who is overseeing the youngsters step by step.

It's a warning to hundreds of other cities where the asbestos manufac-



Kyle Kolb and teacher Dean Herreid discuss editing of "A Breath of Life" as Winter Haugen and Helen Clarke watch the documentary's opening seconds.

tured by W.R. Grace was shipped and installed. Herreid says the red flag is important because the federal Environmental Protection Agency has said it doesn't have funding to clean homes in other states – an interview that will be included in the documentary.

The film is one of the projects funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences

through the University of Montana, said on-site manager Helen Clarke. Two professional filmmakers from Missoula also have offered assistance as artists in residence.

However, the students have been enthusiastic and eager.

"These guys have picked it up so quickly," Clarke said. "Instead of putting kids in front of the camera, we wanted to put them behind it."

A diagram of the U.S. is on a board in the classroom, with lines running in all directions from Libby. It looks like an advertisement for an airline's flight schedules, but the words below identify it as "The Spider Web of Grace."

It shows where the contaminated insulation was shipped, and why the

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Film

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problem is a national one.

"It will be powerful," Herreid said. "It's an uplifting film. It's about the strength of Libby.

"We're trying to put this out for all those people with fixer-upper homes where they have a 7-year-old helping them (install insulation) and they don't have a clue."

Ninety-two hours of footage have been shot. That will be whittled to a 38-minute final product. Plans are for the documentary to premier in Missoula's Roxy Theater in June.

Local residents can get a preview Saturday, March 5, during the Asbestos Health Fair from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Ponderosa Room of Libby's City Hall.

Students Kyle Kolb, Winter Haugen, Joey Rucker, Kyle Ames, Anthony Lassabe, Katie Dedrick, Cody Wilkes and Shane Kair and Lorena Mitchell

are the filmmakers. Time coding – or making a minute-by-minute story line that follows the images – is one of the intense aspects of production. It takes eight hours of time coding to produce one hour of tape.

"You've got to make it flow," said Kolb, who has immersed himself in the work.

The students have averaged 30 seconds of finished video per week for the last three weeks. They'll need to maintain that pace to meet the summer release deadline.

Kolb said he signed up for the documentary as a class and ended up liking it more than he anticipated. Now he hopes to become a professional filmmaker.

Everyone working on "A Breath of Life" can feel like accomplished filmmakers when the job is done. Their efforts will reach far.

"It's going nationwide," Herreid said.